

The Irascibles: Painters Against the Museum (New York, 1950) [book review]

By: [Maggie Murphy](#)

Murphy, M. *The Irascibles: Painters Against the Museum* (New York, 1950), by Daniel Belasco, Bradford Collins, Beatriz Cordero, et al. [book review]. *ARLIS/NA Reviews*. May 2021.

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Abstract:

“Dear Sir: The undersigned painters reject the monster national exhibition to be held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art next December, and will not submit work to its jury.” So begins the open letter signed by eighteen American abstract artists at the heart of *The Irascibles: Painters Against the Museum* (New York, 1950), an exhibition catalog published by Fundación Juan March.

Keywords: book review | Metropolitan Museum of Art | abstract painting | New York School

Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

The Irascibles: Painters Against the Museum (New York, 1950)

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by Daniel Belasco, Bradford Collins, Beatriz Cordero, et al. Fundación Juan March, July 2020. 304 p. ill. ISBN 9788470756658 (h/c), \$55.00.

Reviewed May 2021

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“Dear Sir: The undersigned painters reject the monster national exhibition to be held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art next December, and will not submit work to its jury.” So begins the open letter signed by eighteen American abstract artists at the heart of *The Irascibles: Painters Against the Museum (New York, 1950)*, an exhibition catalog published by Fundación Juan March. The letter, sent to the President of the aforementioned museum and shared with the New York Times, protested the planned “American Painting Today” juried exhibition on the grounds that the panel selected by the conservative institution to judge submissions to the show was “notoriously hostile to advanced art”—in other words, abstract painting. The signatories, many of whom would come to be identified with the New York School, included household

names as well as lesser-known artists: William Baziotes, James Brooks, Fritz Bultman, Jimmy Ernst, Adolph Gottlieb, Hans Hofmann, Weldon Kees, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Richard Pousette-Dart, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Theodoros Stamos, Hedda Sterne, Clyfford Still, and Bradley Walker Tomlin.



While Fundación Juan March was forced to close its doors just a few days after the opening of its *Irascibles* exhibition in March 2020 due to the global spread of COVID-19, the paintings by members of the letter-writing coalition curated for the show play a relatively minor role in the eponymous catalog. Rather, the real intellectual project of the text is to examine the controversy around the open letter and its reception in American public life, including a 1951 photo essay in *Life* magazine featuring a group portrait, by photographer Nina Leen, of all but three of the artists who signed the open letter. Through critical essays by

curators and art historians published alongside high-quality reproductions of primary documents such as contemporaneous press clippings, exhibition ephemera, and correspondence between key players, the catalog traces the trajectory of an emerging narrative about the modern art movement of the mid-twentieth-century United States.

All in all, *The Irascibles* is a substantial work that places itself directly in dialogue with foundational texts about this period, including Irving Sandler's *Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (Praeger, 1970), Dore Ashton's *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* (University of California Press, 1973), and Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (University of Chicago Press, 1983). With more than 230 illustrations, a detailed timeline of events, maps charting the locations of artist meeting spaces, galleries, and museums in Manhattan, and an extensive bibliography, the coffee table-style catalog would be a strong addition to college, university, and art and design school libraries that support the study of modern art history. However, technical services librarians take note: there is a single, loose onion skin overlay nested between pages 116 and 117 that will doubtless become damaged or disappear if the catalog circulates, unless it is otherwise secured.